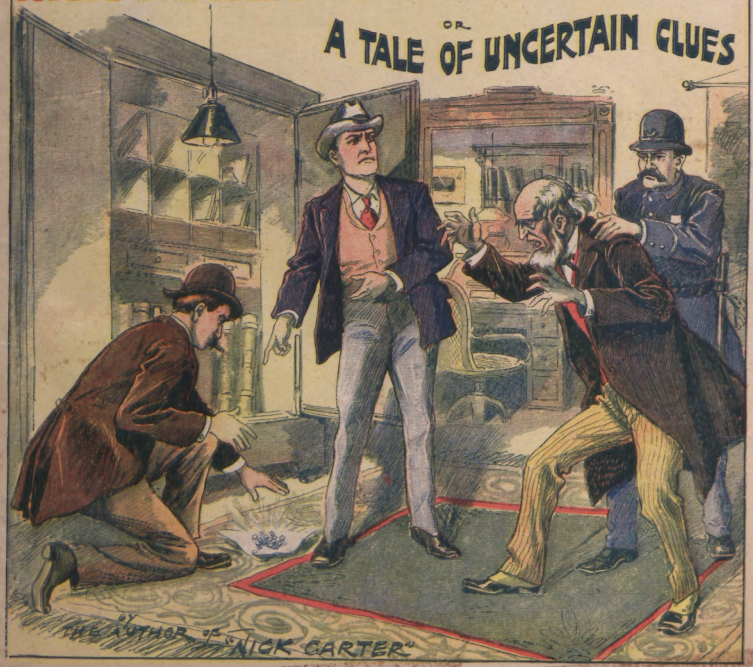
NEW
NICK CARTER WEEKLY

Issued Weekly. By Subscription $2.50 per year. Entered at Second Class Matter at New York Post Office by STREET & SMITH, 238 William St., N. Y.

No. 360. Price, Five Cents.

NICK CARTER AND THE MISSING JEWELS

OR, A TALE OF UNCERTAIN CLUES



"My God!" cried the miserable man. "I did not steal them. I did not put them there. I know nothing of them." "There is but one thing to do," said Nick Carter to the officer, "arrest this man."

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Nick Carter and the Missing Jewels;

OR,

A TALE OF UNCERTAIN CLEWS.

By the author of "NICHOLAS CARTER."

CHAPTER I.

A SPECULATIVE HOLD-UP.

Two men were walking briskly back and forth on the platform of the Pacific Railroad Station at Omaha. It was a dark and starless night, but their voices sounded out cheerfully to the few belated passengers who noted them as they paced up and down.

"Yes, I ought to be very well satisfied," said the younger man. "I certainly have a chance of promotion, our firm is the biggest in America."

"And the world," put in the older man. "I congratulate you, Frank, you'll be a member of the firm before you know it. The great diamond brokers—Baymore, Say & Co., Maiden Lane, New York City!"

"If I get back alive, with this cargo of one hundred thousand dollars' worth of uncut diamonds, I'll be happy. Say," he added, in a low voice, and touching the other's arm confidentially, "Mr. Sontag, did you ever feel sort of creepy, as if things might happen?"

"Oh! well, I don't know as I ever did. There's your train now."

Frank Armour was soon seated comfortably in the smoker, the bright light contrasting pleasantly with the utter blackness outside.

Frank was a fine-looking man of thirty-five years old. He had been for fifteen years the trusted employee of the great New York firm. He had never lost a dollar, or even a penny, as he was proud of saying.

Although his sales had not been as great as he had hoped, he still had sold nearly a quarter of a million dollars' worth of stones.

His companion of the platform was a well-known and prosperous diamond broker of Omaha. He had known Frank for some years, and Frank looked upon him as a friend. He had, in fact, stopped at his house on this trip, and had felt safer than at a hotel.

As the train swung out from the station, Sontag had called to him:

"Remember what I told you, Frank."

Frank laughed, and nodded. What Sontag had said was: "Never despise precautions." "Good advice," Frank said to himself. "Nobody on this train will ever know that I am in reality a veritable jewel case!"

Frank looked about him observantly. There were nearly a dozen men in the car; most of them were curled up in their seats trying to sleep. Directly across from him was a burly man who looked as if he might be a cattle man going East to spend his money. In the same seat by the window was a youngish man of peculiar appearance, his hair was coal black and his rather bushy mustache bright red. Frank was puzzled by a curious resemblance to some one, he could not tell who.

The train plunged along through the murky darkness, and soon Frank found himself half dosing. This will never do, he thought, but he closed his eyes to rest them. He opened them quickly a moment after, there was a stir among the passengers. In an instant Frank had his wits about him. He threw up one strong arm to ward off a blow which was descending upon him. All was confusion in the car. While some of the men held aloof, others rushed forward either from curiosity or with some idea of helping the man who was down, but it was too late. Poor Frank Armour lay on the floor of the car, his head partly under the seat, from which he had been stricken, and his torn garments would have revealed to any one knowing his secret that the belt containing the gems was gone!

Wild consternation prevailed in the car. Three pistol shots rang out as the young man who sat opposite Frank Armour rushed down the aisle, flung the door wide, and disappeared into the outer darkness.

A moment after Frank recovered consciousness, and men who had been terrified by the young desperado helped him up, and held on to him as he started wildly toward the car door.

"Hold on, young fellow," said the burly man he had noticed; "don't you try to follow him! You had enough rough usage."

"Where's the conductor?" cried several voices.

Nobody had ever heard of such a bold and spectacular "hold up," even in that paradise for train robbers. One bold rascal had evidently terrorized a dozen men. Not one had come to the rescue of the unfortunate man, who still seemed dazed from the blow which the spectators declared had been given with the pistol and a slungshot.

The conductor appeared upon the scene, but seemed powerless to decide what to do, until spurred on by Frank he said he would make every effort to start a search for the missing passenger at the junction which they were rapidly approaching.

As the train forged into the place, Frank Armour put his hand suddenly to his head, and for the second time lost consciousness.

It was hastily decided by some of the more level headed of the passengers that the wounded man should be taken off the train, and left at the station near the scene of the robbery.

It happened that a good surgeon was at the station, and gave the wounded man immediate attention. Among those who looked on with interest as Frank was borne into the waiting-room was a tall, athletic-looking man, whose searching eyes seemed to see even more than the surgeon.

"There has been foul play here of an unusual character, unless I am greatly mistaken," he said, in a low tone to the young fellow who stood beside him. "I should like to know something of this case."

He turned with a questioning look to the surgeon who had succeeded in restoring Frank to consciousness. The surgeon caught his eye at the same moment, and recognized the great detective with whom he had had dealings in other days.

"Mr. Carter," he said, "I think you would better take charge of this." He handed Nick, for it was no other, a small package. "The conductor gave it to me," he said.

Nick put it quietly into his pocket, and listened as the excited men told all that they knew of the occurrence.

Quite naturally, it seemed best for the surgeon and Nick to make the arrangements, and Frank was sent at once to a hospital, while Nick and his friend went to the hotel where they were staying. They were in

C—— on some private business, and when the next morning Nick received a message from the officials of the road to look after the matter of the diamond robbery he was at liberty to turn his attention to it at once. By noon he had also been requested by telegram from New York to take charge of the case for the Maiden Lane jewelers. He felt that he had just such a case as appealed most to him. He sat down to think the matter quietly over. The only clew he had was the poor description given of the robber by the burly man who had interested himself in the case and had stopped over a train to be of such use as he might. The little package contained simply a bushy red mustache and a piece of a white handkerchief.

"Not much here," said Nick. No time had been lost by local detectives in investigating the scene of the hold up. Nick, never satisfied until he had been over the ground himself, proceeded to the point where the missing man had made his escape. Like the others, Nick found no trace whatever of him. He could not have been injured, for there were no blood stains on the tall rank grass or farther down the embankment, over which he must have rolled, upon the stones and moss which covered some of them.

"It seems to me, Chick," said Nick, for the friend spoken of was no other than Chick, "that the thing to do is to meet the conductor, question him, and find out quietly what he knows of the other passengers on his train.

"I think," said Chick, "I should question that man who stopped off, and was so eager to help. I believe he is a suspicious character."

Nick laughed a long and loud peal.

"I am not laughing at you; but Mr. Morgan is one of the best-known men in Des Moines, and helped me when I was there looking up those horse thieves. It don't do to be too suspicious even if we are making it our business to suspect. I want you to become an expert in judging of good men, Chick. It's quite as important in our profession as to judge of bad ones."

Chick assented gravely. He thought it quite a discovery, and looked up at Nick admiringly.

A few telegrams brought Mr. Bonner, the conductor, back to C——. He was closeted with Nick for several hours, but nothing of real value could be obtained from him.

"I noticed the young fellow," Mr. Bonner said, "because of his queer combination of red mustache and black hair, and a puzzling resemblance he bears to somebody. There were no other men on the car whom I noticed or thought anything about. They were like the people I see every day of my life."

After this fruitless interview, Nick telephoned to the hospital to see if he could see Mr. Armour, and talk with him. The nurse told him to come right up, and Nick lost no time.

The wounded man met him with a most sorrowful countenance.

"You know what this means to me," he said. "The good record of fifteen years all overturned. Mr. Carter," here he raised himself on his elbow, "I would give ten years of my life to catch that man, and get those diamonds."

"No doubt, no doubt, Mr. Armour; but I give you my word that I will catch him if he is alive, and you won't have to give even a month of your life. Armour, who was the last man you saw in Omaha? Who knew that you had the diamonds with you?"

"Not a soul in Omaha knew that I had a single diamond in my possession but Mr. Sontag, with whom I stopped. He came to the train with me, and, by the way, he called out a pretty wise sentence, 'Never despise precautions!' I was going into the car just as he sang that out to me. He is a good friend of mine, and has made me very much at home at his house on my last two trips."

"Well," said Nick, as if tired of the subject, "our country is pretty prosperous, business all right everywhere, I guess. Mr. Sontag has no difficulties, I judge?"

"No; he told me he never was so well fixed in all his life. He came to Omaha a pretty poor man; with a past, too, I have always thought."

Nick did not pursue the subject.

"You are sure that you would know your assailant

if you were to see him?" said Nick, as he was leaving the room.

"Yes, if my head ever gets right again." Frank looked very feeble and weary as he said good-by to the detective. He had great faith in Nick Carter, but what had he to go upon? A bushy, red mustache and a piece of white linen. Frank did not know that in one corner of that piece of linen in a fine handwriting was embroidered a part of a line in German signifying "Greeting from Colog——" There it was torn away, but anybody could complete that with two other letters, making it spell Cologne.

Nick went thoughtfully back to the hotel. He found that Chick had not been idle.

"See here, Nick," he cried; "I went with Mr. Bonner to the alleged Rogues' Gallery here, and he pointed out a picture which he is willing to swear is that of our man!"

"Good boy!" said Nick; "this will save a lot of valuable time." He looked at the picture thoughtfully. It was of a young man about twenty-five years old. He wore no mustache, but the eyes and the whole expression of the face was that of a desperate man.

"Chick," he said, presently, "I have some letters to write. You go up to the hospital, and show this picture to Mr. Armour, and ask him if he is willing to state positively that this is the man who struck him."

It seemed to Nick that he had barely commenced work, when Chick came tearing into the room, crying out:

"He's gone!"

"Who is gone?" demanded Nick.

"Frank Armour. The hospital people don't know where he is. Gone with friends, the house doctor said."

"This is pretty serious, Chick. Some one is watching our every movement. The first thing to be done is to find Frank Armour. Some clew will develop from that."

CHAPTER II.

THE DETECTIVES AT WORK.

The young house doctor at the hospital had evidently been annoyed by some remarks of Chick's when he found that Armour had gone without leaving word where. He met Nick with a great show of dignity.

"Certainly he is gone. His friends called for him."

He himself had been called to the rear of the house to attend to a man who had fallen in a fit, and while he was out a carriage had driven rapidly up, and Mr. Armour had been helped into it, and it was driven so hurriedly away that the girl in the office, who was kept busy at the telephone, thought that some one evidently was trying to catch some train. She told Nick, when carefully questioned, that she heard some one say as they passed the door: "Yes, Mr. Carter has important news for you."

"The mystery deepens," thought Nick.

That afternoon the papers announced that a certain well-known detective had left the city, and was about to go to Europe to investigate the alleged plot thickening around the crowned heads of three countries. He was accompanied by his brother.

Late that night a young man with black hair and a bushy, red mustache came to one of the small hotels of C—— and took a room.

In reality, Nick Carter had gone to Omaha. He was disguised perfectly as a working man, and when he walked into the private office of Miles Sontag, diamond broker, no one would have dreamed that handsome Nick Carter was present.

"I came to answer your advertisement for a coachman," said Nick.

"Have you references?" asked Sontag. Nick produced the best of references.

"He must be honest above everything else," said Sontag, "and I think you fill the bill in that particular, at all events. Come to-morrow morning, and I will instruct you in your duties."

Nick was in time the next morning to see Mr. Sontag's family. It consisted at present of himself, his son, a young fellow of about twenty-five, and a sister,

an elderly woman, who had recently returned from a trip abroad.

Nick, when left alone in the stable, gave vent to his feelings in a sort of Indian dance. "All things come to him who waits and works," he said.

Meanwhile, Chick was not idle. Chick, with his bushy, red mustache and coal-black hair! He had found out many things since he had gone about in this disguise. He felt almost sure that he had found out the whereabouts of Frank Armour, and was about to put his theories to the test. He had found the hack driver who had taken Frank on the first part of his hurried trip that night. The rest had been more difficult.

The hack driver admitted reluctantly that the movements of the men had excited his curiosity, and he had hired a boy to take his hack back to the town, and he had followed the other far enough to see the direction they took. He was seemingly afraid of getting into trouble, but after Chick had assured him that he would not draw him into the affair he described the house into which he felt sure they had gone.

Chick followed this lead. The first driver had driven two miles into the country, and Chick went over this part of the road rapidly; after that he walked some distance thoughtfully along. He was surprised to see that the road narrowed down to a lane. It was bordered by tall, unsightly hedges, and there were many great old trees behind which he could hide if necessary. He finally drew up before an old weather-beaten house. It was set some thirty feet back from the lane. He looked searchingly around. He then went cautiously around the house, and creeping to a small window in the rear he looked into a large room comfortably furnished. There was a bed in one corner, and from the arrangement of the clothes he decided that some one who was sick was occupying it. He leaped to a conclusion. Frank Armour was there, and alone. Chick then went to the front door, and plied the old-fashioned knocker long and well. It was answered shortly by an old woman, who asked Chick kindly what he wanted.

"I have lost my way, and wish to know the best road to take me to C——" said Chick.

"I am a stranger, too," said the woman. "My husband was hurt in a runaway, and I was sent for to take care of him; so I cannot tell you."

"Can I come in, and rest a few moments?" he asked; then, with a fine appearance of candor, he added: "As I am a stranger, and you are alone, I will not ask that, but just sit here on the step."

"I'm not alone," the woman said, quickly, and Chick walked boldly in. The woman led the way into the room where the bed was, and Chick noted at once a different arrangement of the bedclothes. The bed was empty. Chick determined upon bold measures.

"If you are not alone," said he, "show me some other person, and perhaps he can tell me the way to C——"

The woman left the room, and in a moment Chick heard a voice he knew well. He would have sworn it was the voice of Sontag, the diamond broker. Yet in a moment the door opened, and a young fellow, apparently of his own age, came in.

"Good-evening," he said; "the nearest road is straight back this lane, then turn to the right, and keep on till you come to a big spring, then take the road to the left, and you will be all right."

Chick thanked him, and walked briskly away. He had not found out a thing that he could give proof of, but he was convinced that some mystery hung about that house.

It certainly was the house to which Frank Armour was brought.

How he wished for Nick, with his quick intellect and wider experience. He was so thinking, when he heard a whisper, and a man peered out from behind one of the big trees. It was quite dark.

"Say, it's all right," the voice said. "Armour will never see his diamonds, and his firm will never see Armour."

Chick did not dare speak. He hardly dared breathe.

"That's a great make-up of yours. Good thing we thought of the red mustache as a sign."

Chick was excited, and amused, too. It had been only a sort of joke to please himself when he had donned the bushy, red ornament.

"Will he get there all right?" Chick ventured, in a whisper.

"I don't know. Twelve miles is a long ride for a sick man. Well, so long. Be good to yourself." And the man was gone.

Chick flew back to C——. He went by a round-about way to his hotel. He paid his bill, and, in a new and most strikingly changed attire, boarded the next train for Omaha.

It was late when he arrived. But he lost no time in communicating with Nick. "I wanted you! You would have known just what it all meant, and would have found out much from the man. All I could do safely and well was to take to my heels."

"Never mind," said Nick, kindly; "you have found one important thing. We must scour the country in every direction for twelve"—laughing—"even thirteen miles."

Nick arranged for a short absence, leaving Chick in his place, telling him grimly to see everything, hear everything, and speak nothing. He had become convinced from many things that there was something far more mysterious and involved than the one fact of the stolen diamonds. Who ever did that deed was in peril of some kind, or was shielding some one who was. Time alone would tell. Back to C—— Nick went, and engaging rooms at a large hotel he disguised simply by the addition of a skillfully contrived wig and beard. He could have deceived his best friend.

To find Frank Armour was a very important step in the web Nick was weaving. If he could and would identify the picture from the Rogues' Gallery as that of the robber it would be most valuable material as proof.

Chick had again proved himself too valuable to be left long in Omaha at the present stage of things, and Nick wired Patsy to come on and quietly take Chick's place. This could be managed all right, thanks to the ingenuity of Nick. A few hours sufficed to arrange this.

When the detectives were once more together they talked over the situation as it now stood revealed.

Summed up as it appeared, Sontag was in trouble. His sister was anxious about him. She had spent six months in Cologne, and had brought many souvenirs home upon which were written, printed or embroidered the words "Greeting from Cologne." The son was evidently a mysterious sort of young fellow, about whom all sorts of strange stories were told in the servants' quarters. The cook told Chick that one night after he came in late she heard his father groaning and almost crying. She was frightened, and went to his door, and asked him if he was sick, and he replied that he had the toothache. "As all his teeth are false I don't see how that could be," she had added, wonderingly.

They compared notes on a great many side issues, and then Nick, turning to Chick, whispered, impressively:

"I have found Frank Armour!"

CHAPTER III.

WHERE IS CHICK?

When Frank Armour had parted from Nick that day at the hospital he fell into a nervous and dejected state. From this he was aroused by the joyful intelligence that Mr. Carter wanted him at once, and had good news for him. Feeble as he felt, this nerved him up at once. He was so excited that he did not wonder at all that it was a strange attendant who imparted this welcome news. He was alone in the carriage, although there was another man on the seat with the driver. He did not even suspect anything when they changed carriages, for he knew that the way of a great detective was hedged about with mystery. When he had been helped into the house, and into bed by the man who had accompanied him, he drew a long breath of relief. Mr. Carter would be there shortly he was assured. A kindly old woman came with a bowl of steaming porridge and a little glass of cordial, which he drank with a feeling of gratitude. In after years he often wondered at his credulity. He could only set it down to the weakness occasioned by his assault. He never knew, for Nick never told him, that his food had been tampered with at the hospital.

He fell into a deep and dreamless sleep. When he awoke it was noon. As he turned in the bed, he heard some voices whispering excitedly.

"This will never do," said one, distinctly. "It's too near town. It's dangerous."

"It's all the better for that," replied the other. "They won't think of looking for him so near by."

The voices died away. Frank felt weak and confused. The old woman brought him more gruel and more cordial, and he fell asleep till dark. He thought he heard a loud knocking at the door, but soon fell asleep. Frank's surprise would have been great if he had known that he was at least twelve miles from where he fell asleep. He saw no more of the old woman, but a rough-looking fellow brought him a glass of water, saying:

"Drink this, you bloke. The doctor said that you must fast a few days if you want to get well."

"When was the doctor here?" asked poor Frank.

"While you was asleep."

"Was any one with him?"

"Yes, a tall guy who said he'd come again when you was better."

Then, as he looked upon the pitiful figure, he said, with rather more humanity:

"You better have a little milk. That won't hurt no baby."

"I want to do just as the doctor told me to do."

"It's all right," said the fellow, and Frank drank a few swallows. "It's all in the way of business," the man muttered to himself, as he sat down to a good meal of ham and eggs; "but I didn't allow as I was willing to starve a man. I've no kick ag'in a good, quick job." Here the savory meal engaged all his attention.

Night came on swiftly to the watcher; but to Frank the hours dragged. He never knew just how long he lay in a half-stupid condition, when his jailer came to him, and said:

"You wouldn't guess it, maybe, but I've got an old woman and a kid. The old woman wouldn't be no great loss, but the kid—— Say, the kid's going to kick it, I guess. I've got to go. You just keep still here, and I'll come back in a little while."

Frank made some feeble signs of assent, and the fellow came close to the bed, and looked down at his prisoner. He started toward the outside door, but came back, and fumbling around in the closet he found a small bottle of liquor, and laid it on the side of the bed. He called Frank's attention to it, and said:

"You'd better take some." Then to himself he muttered: "I wouldn't like him to meet the kid, seeing as how they'se both goin' the same way."

He left the house, after carefully locking it, and was soon lost in the shadows of the old trees which hung their branches low over the road.

An hour later Nick Carter and Chick came stealing through the bushes at the back of the house.

"You wait here, Chick," said Nick, who always wanted to take the most dangerous part of the work; "I'll fix your entrance in a minute." He soon was able to open the door, and stealthily slipped in. The sound of a low moan and then heavy breathing directed his steps. He stood peering into the darkness for a full minute before he made out the form of a man stretched out on the bed. Bending over him, his heart gave a great bound. It was surely Frank Armour. By a signal to Chick he conveyed this joyful fact, and Chick soon came to his assistance. They locked the door, moved heavy furniture against it, shut the blinds, and then made a faint light. They saw with genuine feeling that poor Armour seemed at death's door. Nick gave him a few drops of brandy which he had brought, and in a few minutes Frank opened his eyes.

"You've come at last," said Frank, "I thought it would be too late."

"Never too late to mend," Chick cried out, cheerfully.

"Frank Armour," said Nick, impressively, "all depends upon your rallying all your forces."

Frank gave a wan smile, and took eagerly all the restoratives with which Nick had provided himself. He had feared that Armour had been made away with, but had hoped against hope, and had brought stimulants and medicines of various kinds.

The first great need was of something nourishing, but he did not dare wait long enough to cook any-

thing. After Frank was sufficiently aroused and made comfortable, Nick sent Chick out to signal the men who were waiting to carry them to a place of safety. As Nick opened the door, he heard steps behind him, and, picking Armour up as if he were a child, he sped out of the house, lifted his burden into the carriage, which was drawn up as close as possible, and directed the men in front to drive as if for their lives. There was no time to inquire what had become of Chick. Chick must take care of himself.

As the carriage rolled swiftly along, Nick supported the sick man tenderly, and gave him cordials and wine, and by the time they reached their destination he looked like a different man. Nick said to him, when he had himself placed him comfortably on a bed:

"Now, Mr. Armour, promise me that unless I personally come for you that you will not leave this room."

"I promise, gladly. I feel as if I never wanted to have you out of my sight."

A trusty man of Nick's choosing was installed as nurse, and Nick hurried back to the hotel, expecting to find Chick awaiting him.

The night passed with no tidings of Chick. If Nick had not needed him intensely he would not have taken the time to hunt for him. But Chick had shown wonderful insight in this case, and he felt that Chick must be found at once. He set the necessary machinery in motion to search for him, and he went at once early in the morning to interview his patient in whom he now took more than a professional interest. He was delighted to find him in a greatly improved condition. The freedom from drugs, the good, easily-digested food having worked a miracle.

"If you feel able to talk a little this morning it would be a fine thing," said Nick; "but I do not wish to injure you by hurrying matters."

"It will do me good to feel that I am doing something. Go ahead."

"Then, Frank Armour, are you willing to swear that this is the picture of the man who assaulted you on the train? If you are," said Nick, holding out the photograph, "our case is clear."

It was a trembling hand that Frank Armour held out for the picture. An ashen pallor spread over his face, as he exclaimed:

"I never saw that face before." He sank back in his chair, faint and breathless. Nick, schooled as he was to conceal emotion, did not restrain an ejaculation of dismay.

It was as if a child's house of cards had fallen.

"Never mind, Armour," Nick rallied to say. "I've suspected all the time that this is too easy. There's a third party I have to reckon with. Don't you worry. Now, I am going to get down to business. I must go now and consult my assistant. You eat and sleep and get strong, and I promise to bring the true man's picture next time."

"Mr. Carter," called out Frank, as Nick reached the door; "I think there is the strongest kind of a resemblance there, but I will take my oath that the man who struck me had a scar on the left cheek. I saw it plainly, and I have tried to make out some mark on the face of this man. It is so like, and yet it is not the man."

"You will swear this?" asked Nick, with solemnity.

"I will," responded Armour, with equal feeling.

As Nick went back to his hotel he communed with himself.

"This is not the first false clew I have followed. Perhaps it is not a false clew, after all. If, as I at first suspected, there are two young men masquerading in this affair, it would solve several of the puzzles."

At the hotel a cipher telegram from Patsy was handed him. It said simply "Come at once."

Now Nick was troubled, for no word had come from Chick. He did not know whether it was wise to trust to Patsy's judgment. He concluded, however, that Patsy would never be so peremptory if there had not been some great discovery made. "Patsy's idea of what is great may not coincide with mine," he thought; but he did not hesitate long. He left on the next train for Omaha.

To his great surprise, Patsy met him at the station in a curious and complete disguise. When they were

apart from the crowd and there was no danger of being overheard, Patsy whispered:

"Say, there's two of the guys! As near alike as two sparrers. They kin fly, too."

"What do you mean?"

"The young Sontag he comes up to me, and says: 'I want you to get out of here before a friend of mine comes in; you stay away a half an hour, and I will make it worth your while.' I said I'd go. I did, but 'Miss Jones came back,' and I'm blowed if there wan't two of 'em, only one had a scar on his cheek, and he said: 'How much longer is this going on?' and the other he said: 'Not much; but you have to keep yourself dark,' and then I couldn't hear another word."

"Patsy," said Nick, "you have heard enough, and the very thing I wanted to know. Go back, and keep your eyes and ears just as carefully primed as you have. You are going to get good pay for this bit of work, my son," Nick added, kindly.

Patsy's face flushed with pleasure, and he felt amply paid, for the approval of Nick was his richest reward.

Nick hastened back to C—— with one question in his mind and heart: "Where is Chick?"

CHAPTER IV.

NICK VISITS THE SONTAG HOUSE.

To tell the truth, Chick was not in an uncomfortable condition as far as his body was concerned. He had simply been skillfully kidnaped. He was evidently, so far as he could make out, being kept out of the way till something should occur. What that was he pondered over and over. He thought at last that it was the death of Armour the villains were waiting for. But in that case what had happened to Nick? The more he dwelt upon it the more sure he was that this was all the work of blundering amateurs. He was almost in a fever of excitement. If Nick had escaped with Armour, and he had rallied and recognized the picture, why didn't Nick come to his rescue? He felt that the mere work of catching the scoundrels would not be so difficult.

Chick had tried to liberate himself, but greatly to his disgust he could not make the least headway. It was a curious room in which he was detained. It was at the top of a tower-like building. The room was lighted from a skylight which was so high above his head that he could not by any manner of means at his disposal even look out.

"See here," he said, to the boy who brought him food one day, in place of an old woman who seemed to be both deaf and dumb, "is money any object to you?"

"Nope!" retorted the incorruptible Jimmy.

"It isn't?" laughed Chick, "what is?"

"Nothin'," said the boy.

"See here," said Chick, "if you don't care for filthy lucre, you may have some other feelings; would you be willing to mail a letter for me to my mother?"

"Nope."

"To my father?"

"Nope."

"To my wife and infant child?"

"Nope."

"Well, I give you up. If, however, my son, you should be in need of that which makes the mare go, or if you wish to know where dollars grow, just let me know."

The boy stared stupidly at him and went away. The next morning he brought Chick an old newspaper, and said in a whisper:

"It ain't true about them gold dollars, is it?"

"True as steel, but I shall never tell a boy who won't mail a letter to a man's infant child."

"I'll mail it," the boy declared, "if they bust me."

"Oh, no you won't, but you can do something just as good for me. If you will go to the B—— Hotel, and ask if there is a letter for J. J. Stevens, and tell not a soul, when you come back I will give you five dollars, and when I am at home again I will give you four times that amount."

The boy's eyes gleamed with a sudden, baleful light. "If old Skull and Bones gets me he'll make mince-meat of me."

"He won't get you," said Chick, cheerfully. He had no faith in the boy's ability to carry out this very

simple plan, but as he could do no better he would send out this little imbecile.

Of course there was no mail for J. J. Stevens, and the boy considered his mission fruitless. Possibly if he had known the consequences he might have been consoled. Chick's dollars were received gloatingly, and Chick never saw his messenger again, for that night the skylight was cautiously removed, a ladder let down, and after a short time Chick had regained his liberty and was once more with his friend.

Together they went over their experiences.

"Patsy's discovery lets the light in now," said Chick.

"I've seen Bonner, the conductor, and he thinks he remembers the scar now, but he really is not much help as a witness, he is so uncertain."

"If we could afford the time," said Chick, "I'd like to ferret out my abductors, and return one good blow for that evil one they gave me. My head is sore yet."

"We have no time now, we can attend to that later." Then in whispered tones Nick detailed his plans to Chick. Amazement overspread Chick's face, then he laughed.

"I wrote to her," said Nick, "to this effect: 'I have learned through a mutual acquaintance that you have spent much time in Cologne, and as I am greatly interested in that city I wish very much to meet you.' She immediately replied that it would give her pleasure to have me call. So this evening Mr. G. Randolph Hunt will send in his card, and, I trust, find out a little more definitely about Sontag's sons."

Chick had his work also outlined, and the two men parted with the feeling that they were now nearing the end of their labors, which had seemed to drag on in a most aggravating way.

The New York firm had written Nick that they were about to offer an immense reward for the recovery of the diamonds. Nick wanted this money, but far more he wanted the rich satisfaction of clearing up the mystery.

He feared, as did the firm, that this was the beginning of a plan to carry out audaciously the robbery of jewels, and it would be most encouraging if they succeeded in this bold and dashing theft.

Nick Carter, attired in the most faultless style of evening dress, sat in the parlor of the Sontag home. Mrs. Kane, the sister of Sontag, was delightedly going over the particulars of her stay in Prussia.

"I met my husband there first, and I always wanted to go back and visit, even alone, the old places we enjoyed so much."

"You have no children?" asked Nick.

"No. But my nephews are, or one of them is, as dear to me as if he were mine. You see my brother has two sons, twins, and I had one of them with me a great deal."

As they were silent a moment a young man came in, and after being introduced he joined in the conversation.

"Aunt Kate has developed a perfect passion in me to go abroad," he said, "and, in fact, my plans are all made, and I sail next week for Liverpool. By the way, auntie, I've lost that pretty handkerchief you gave me, and the queerest part of it is that I never carried it. I was keeping it for some great occasion. Auntie brought me a handkerchief from Cologne," he explained to Nick. He seemed a guileless youth, simple sort of fellow, weak, perhaps, but not vicious and certainly not bright.

Nick confessed to himself that he was puzzled by his appearance. He was the counterpart of the young fellow whose picture they had obtained from the Rogues' Gallery. There was no scar upon his face, yet Armour swore the robber had one. These idle thoughts passed through the detective's mind, as he carried on a commonplace conversation with the two.

Nevertheless, he determined, slight as the evidence was, in fact, no evidence at all in the strict sense, to have this young fellow most carefully watched.

A few days later Nick received the following cipher message from New York: "No one answering description left for Liverpool to-day. Young man resembling it in some particulars did buy a ticket. He had bad scar on cheek. When sailing time came he did not appear."

Nick did not sleep a wink that night. It seemed to him that some one fully as watchful as he and Chick and Patsy combined was on the lookout, and every point was watched.

All this only served to nerve him for a great struggle. He enjoyed it as he always did difficulties to be surmounted. He was determined to succeed. During the night he changed all his plans. There's bigger game than this young fellow or his brother.

Summoning Chick, they proceeded immediately to the old house in C——. To their surprise, they found that the house was cheerful, open to the sunshine; the old woman who had opened the door to Chick met Nick this morning, and answered all his questions with seeming candor, but with absolute untruth.

"I hate," said Nick to himself, "to begin operations by arresting an old woman, but justice knows no sex."

When told that she must go with them, she manifested no emotion, but went readily along. They gave her no opportunity to communicate with any one. As she was at the time alone in the house, and with their eagle eyes upon her could leave no message for any one, they felt at ease. They had not gone far in the closed carriage, when they were overtaken by a man on horseback. The place was just where the road narrowed down to the lane. Although all were sharply on the lookout, the suddenness with which the man wheeled his horse about and drew out a pistol and fired at the driver was startling. The first shot passed over his head, but the next sang close to his ear. By this time Chick, who was on the seat with the driver, covered the horseman with his revolver, while the driver whipped up his horses, and they plunged madly forward. At this two men on horseback came up with speed and silence from behind the horseman; while one checked his horse in front the other with a spring landed on the horse, and throwing his arms about the rider disarmed him his prisoner.

So speedily had the whole thing been accomplished that hardly a word was spoken. The prisoner muttered an oath, and attempted to cover his face. "It's no go," said one of his captors; "men can't fire off pistols in my district without getting arrested for it."

An expression of relief made the prisoner look almost smiling. "So that is the charge against me."

"Of course, you idiot. Did you suppose I was arresting you for stealing my grandmother's glasses?"

A bigger day's work had been done than Nick had dreamed of doing.

He found that in tying one knot he often fastened other threads.

CHAPTER V.

NICK ANSWERS A STRANGE SUMMONS.

Sontag, the diamond broker and successful business man, sat alone in his handsome bedchamber. His face was almost distorted with what might have been taken for toothache by one more credulous than his cook. His eyes were red with the peculiar redness that sleeplessness gives to those no longer young.

"Oh!" he groaned, "the folly of not letting well enough alone. Why did I ever confide in that boy. Why did I ever give him an insight into my past! To warn him? No, rather to point out how he could go and do likewise. His own father, too!"

Sometimes Sontag thought he would go to Frank Armour at the hospital, where he supposed he was, and tell him all. Then he waited in the hope that the years in which he had tried to be decent might provide some excuse for his present plight.

Sontag would have bewailed his lot more if he had known of a scene which was taking place at that moment.

Nick Carter had about come to the conclusion, from certain information given him, that he had made several mistakes.

Like every great detective he knew the full value of coincidence and resemblance. Sometimes the web seemed to infold the young Sontags, and then there was a break.

He sat ruminating deeply, when the bell on his door rang sharply. As he opened it he saw a queer figure standing there. He was a slim, dark fellow with a scar on his cheek, and the eyes of a ferret.

"Can I come in?" he asked.

For answer Nick opened the door wide, and made a little gesture of assent.

"You don't remember me, do you?" asked the fellow.

"I'm not sure," said Nick, cautiously.

"Well, I've seen you, and you did me a big favor once. I'm in trouble again, and if you'll help me out a little in a financial way, I'll tell you something that will be worth all it costs."

"You'll have to tell first," said Nick; "I'm willing to pay all your knowledge is worth. Go on; time is money."

"Did it ever occur to you that Sontag, of Omaha, had something to do with the diamond robbery?"

"The diamond robbery?" laughed Nick. "Has the world suddenly become so good that there is only one diamond gone?"

"I mean the hold up on the train, and the robbery of Frank Armour."

"But who under the sun could or would suspect Sontag?"

A meaning smile lit up the fellow's face.

"See here, Mr. Nicholas Carter, I have worked as a detective myself some years, until I found business which suited me better. I know that with the evidence you have, must have, if even casually interested, in this case you *must* have suspected several people."

"Why Sontag?" said Nick, with an air of great simplicity. So good an actor was he that he deceived his companion for a moment.

"If you will listen patiently I will tell you my reasons for suspecting him. Do you know his early history?"

"I know that he has been about seven or eight years in Omaha," was the reply.

"Is that all?"

"And that he came from Denver, or somewhere about Denver. I am likewise conversant with the fact that he is one of the most successful men who ever came out of the far West."

"So he is."

"Do you know how wealthy he is?" asked Nick, with a view to drawing the fellow out still further.

"He's worth three millions, if a penny, to-day."

"Where did you get your facts and figures?"

"From one of the biggest mercantile agencies in the world."

"Then," said Nick, "being so wealthy it's unlikely that Sontag would either have the temptation or take the risk."

"No one knows better than you," said the fellow, "that there are lots of other things that enter in."

"If you have anything to say," said Nick, impatiently, "say it. This discussion of men's motives is interesting perhaps, but not exactly worth paying for."

For a detective this man was altogether too long-winded to suit Nick.

"I'll hurry, then. Bill Sontag began as a newsboy, worked up to keeping a little stand; he was decent, and honest, naturally, but when he got a little money saved and began to dress up and go to the races he got bit, so to speak, by the money bug, and swelled up and bust. I could talk faster if I had something to wet my whistle with."

"After you are through you shall have something, so hurry along."

"At last he went prospecting with some other fellows of his style; they all got something pretty good, and then Bill he cleared out with all the swag. They traced him all over as soon as they got a little something together, but it was too long after for them to find him. He had disappeared as if the earth had swallowed him up. After a few years these men met, there were five of them, and they swore a solemn oath that if found they would pay all their debts to him. Say, Carter, one of them men had a wife and little baby he was going home to. Being out in the hills sort of sobered him. Another had an old mother. Do you think that the men who went to grubbing again to get just enough to eat, with nothing to send home, ever forgot Bill Sontag?"

Nick looked at the man with keenly awakened interest.

"Of course," said Nick, "his name wasn't Sontag."

"No; he had a dozen names. It don't matter what he calls himself. *I've* found him!"

The perspiration ran down the man's face. His hands trembled.

Nick rang the bell.

"Bring a pot of strong coffee, and some rolls," he said to the waiter.

Nick made some notes while the man lay back in the chair and closed his eyes.

After he was refreshed, Nick said:

"Now, what has this to do with the diamond robbery of Baymore, Say & Co., Maiden Lane, New York?"

"Everything!" cried the man. "Do you suppose intimidation and restoration of money was enough for men who had gone down to the bottom so that he might be rich, respectable and a good citizen? Not much!"

There had been, then, a wide-spreading plot, just as Nick had suspected. Nick covered his eyes for a moment with his hand, and was lost in thought. He must hear the rest of this tale. He turned toward the man to sign to him to continue, when to his horror the fellow rolled from his chair in a terrifying fit. Nick rang the bell violently, and sent for a doctor. After restoring the man to consciousness, and enjoining perfect quiet, Nick installed one of his most trusted men as a constant watcher over him.

The man was evidently exhausted by the terrible emotions which he had experienced, and the doctor hinted at the use of some drug.

A new trail stretched out before Nick. Yet astounding as the story was, it at once made plain many half-caught gleams of truth.

The old woman who had been remanded as a suspicious character, the young man who had shot at the hack driver, and who was not, as Nick had half fancied he might be, the mysterious son of Sontag, each had a part in their strange story of retribution. How simple it would all be if the man who gave his name to the doctor as Thomas Smith, could have finished the narrative. All that day his mind wandered, and the watcher beside his bed took down many a rambling tale of tramping, and starving, and falling by the wayside; but nothing of any value to Nick.

He had evidently been a leader of desperadoes. Now when his vengeance seemed about to be complete he had fallen, unable to work it out.

While Nick was consulting with Chick and getting in reports from his men in different quarters, he received a strange summons. A crumpled note was thrust into his hand as he was walking up the street toward the hotel. It said simply, "Come to——," giving street number, "give three quick rings to the bell, then go to the back of the house by a narrow path at the side, and some one will met you who will tell you something that will be worth hearing."

Never a coward, Nick determined to go and go alone. He took the precaution to tell Chick and two of his men to be on the lookout, and if he did not return early to come to his relief.

It was a dark and lowering night. Just the night for crime to stalk abroad. A night of mystery. Nick was a cultured, poetical man, and he was affected by it.

He obeyed the instructions to the letter.

It was almost as much as his life was worth to respond to such an appeal, and he knew it.

He groped his way to the rear of the small house. It seemed entirely dark and silent, but the moment he reached the narrow door it opened noiselessly, and a white hand gleamed out for an instant beckoning him in.

Three men sat before a table upon which a lunch was set out; Nick could not see well enough in the very dim light whether they were surprised or whether they had confidently counted on his coming. They all arose as he came in, and spoke respectfully. One of them, the spokesman of the party, said:

"Mr. Carter, we respect you for coming. You are a brave man, but you are in no danger from us. We have no desire to injure any one. In fact, it is in the cause of justice that we are here."

"Justice!" the others exclaimed in one breath.

"Then," said Nick, "let us have some light on the subject."

One of the men turned the gas up a trifle, and Nick saw that he had no beardless boys to deal with. They were comparatively old men.

"We sent a messenger to you the other day," the

spokesman began; "he has not returned, and as he is not very well we fear he has been taken low, and you have not received his message."

"I receive many messages," said Nick, sententiously.

"This was a message from the past."

"Gentlemen," said Nick, "don't let me hasten you unduly, but I am a busy and to-night a very tired man, and I wish you would come at once to the matter in hand."

"We will," said one, whom the others called Jimmy.

"We know who stole the diamonds from Baymore & Say's man. We are out of funds at present, and the knowledge is, we judge, valuable."

Nick was a little weary of this eternal call for money, but he controlled his impatience admirably.

"I will pay well for all the knowledge I use," said he.

"I planned the robbery myself, alone and single-handed," said Jimmy. "The others added little helps and suggestions, but I am to have the most money."

Nick was disgusted.

"You can divide your money as you like after you have it. That is nothing to me. What do you know about this robbery that can be of use to me?"

Then began a long, rambling discussion between the men. It was apparent to a shrewd man like Nick that the fact of his coming, and the prospect of getting hold of some money had upset them entirely. "If I get out of here alive," he said to himself, "I'm lucky."

"Now, then, to business," he said aloud.

In reply to this, one of them brought out a big black bottle. Looking at their red and swollen faces, Nick thought that they had indeed made it a business. He allowed a glass to be partly filled for him, and he dexterously spilled a little on the floor unobserved by them.

As they drank they began to quarrel, and they disagreed utterly upon how much they should tell.

Finally Nick's patience was inwardly exhausted, and he said, in conciliating tones:

"I've thought of the very thing, gentlemen." They paused to listen. "I'll go back to my hotel, and give you a chance to decide on what is best to be done. You are right sensible not to settle it too speedily. You can agree upon some plan. Just drop a postal card in a letter box addressed to me with the words 'everything all right,' and I will meet you again."

As Nick went away from them he felt that possibly the time had not been lost, for he saw plainly that the man who had been sent to him was the only one whose steadiness of purpose had not been disturbed by his later life.

CHAPTER VI.

PATSY AT WORK.

The moment Nick's back was turned, one of the men declared that the only way to get any money was to go boldly and threaten Sontag. The one called Jimmy then swore violently, and said he would love for one to be locked up as a suspicious person who had threatened a good honest man like good Mr. Sontag.

They always pronounced his name as if it were in italics. With a slurring emphasis.

Nevertheless, they did hit upon a plan which all agreed to.

Mr. Sontag received a letter which drove him almost to lunacy.

It was signed "An Old Friend," and informed him that for the sum of twenty-five thousand dollars, paid to a certain person at a certain time, he would receive a good share of the stolen diamonds, and all the past would be forever unrevealed.

"My God," cried the wretched man; "what have I done lately that I should be punished so? I thought I'd been punished for all those old sins or mistakes."

As he sat helpless in his misery, the doorbell rang. He started nervously to his feet. Then braced himself for whatever might come. He drank a glass of wine, and opened the door, since he happened to be alone in the house.

"Why, Frank Armour!" he cried, joyfully, so great was his relief. "Come in! It does my soul good to see you."

Frank shook hands cordially, and then said:

"Mr. Sontag, I have come to think of you as my friend, and I want to talk with you where there is no possibility of our being overheard."

Mr. Sontag led the way to his private room.

"I am pressed for time," said Frank, "and I won't keep you long. What do you know of the state of things?" He looked frankly and confidingly into the eyes of the man before him.

"As I live, I know nothing that will help you, Frank; if I did, you would not have to ask for it. I am going East shortly, and I will see your firm, and you may rest assured that I will not do you an ill turn with them."

"Of course, I am grateful, and I do thank you very much, but I had hoped you might have heard something. I am staying on till something definite is settled, but it looks dark."

"Do you suspect any one?" asked Sontag.

"No one upon whom I am willing to point the finger of suspicion. Oh!" groaned the poor fellow, "if only the thief would return the jewels, I believe the firm in its joy would not investigate further."

"I wish to Heaven he would," said Sontag, fervently.

Frank arose to go, but lingered a moment.

"You know nothing," he repeated.

"Nothing," said Sontag.

Frank went out with a heavy heart. He was joined by Chick, and they conversed earnestly for a few moments, then separated. Neither was alone although he seemed to be. Nick's men watched every movement and safeguarded them.

"Now," said Nick, when all three were together in his room at the hotel, "I am going to have a party some night when this is over."

"A party!" exclaimed Chick.

"Yes, I am going to invite all the people I have suspected."

"Will there be a large company?" asked Armour.

"About twenty-five. Truly, in all my experience I never saw a more highly mixed up affair. Sometimes I almost think I did it myself."

The three men laughed, and Nick went on telling them of several promising clews that had been brought to him. As Nick stood in his room with his friends, undressed, he was strikingly handsome.

Both men had perfect confidence in him. Each knew in his heart that Nick had some new clew that pleased him, and Frank Armour slept better that night than he had for many nights before. As they parted Nick had whispered to him: "Don't write discouraging letters home, Armour; I don't believe you need to."

Frank thought gratefully that not many men, burdened as Nick was, would have thought of such a kindly suggestion.

"I wonder," Nick was asking himself, "if Armour does have an idea how things are going?"

Thomas Smith was meanwhile being cared for in the hope that he would be able to continue his story. Nick did not hear from the mysterious men, as he called them, and he made no effort to watch them beyond satisfying himself that they, or at least part of them, were still staying in the house. The old woman, who had been dismissed from custody after a while, had joined them, greatly to Nick's secret delight, for he had prophesied that she would.

The young man was still in custody, his case being lawfully and judiciously delayed.

Patsy had made friends in his own way with one of the young Sontags. They were visiting one night in the stable where they were working over a favorite horse.

"I want to get him fixed up all right, soon. He is a beauty, and I'd like to keep him, but father says we've got to retrench. I can't think what ails father. Can't be Harry's scrape, for he's been in lots of worse ones, and they didn't worry father a bit."

"In scrapes, is he!" said Patsy. "What's the blooming guy been doing now?"

"I don't exactly know. But he played me a mean trick. Sometimes I think the boy is a little off."

"Off?" said Patsy. "It seems to me that he's away most all the time."

"I don't mean that, but off, you know—not all here."

"Oh," said Patsy, innocently, as he had seen Nick do. "Not all here, yes; not all here." He looked so puzzled that the other young fellow laughed.

"I mean," he began again——

"Why don't you say what you mean?" said Patsy. They both laughed, and Sontag said:

"Mike, don't be so smart. I mean that sometimes I am truly afraid that my brother is a little crazy. Now, you see, I was all ready to go to Europe, partly for pleasure and partly for my father. When I got to New York, had my passage paid for and all, I got a telegram recalling me home." He smoothed the beautiful head of his horse thoughtfully.

"Well," said Patsy, "what was there crazy about that? Didn't want you to go, maybe; was afraid of the water, for you, or somethin'."

"Come Mike, don't fool. I've often thought of talking with you about him. You seem like a good, honest fellow."

"One of the best," broke in Patsy.

"I hurried home and found everybody surprised to have me come."

"How do you know that your brother sent you the message?"

"Why, who else would? Such a fool thing, and mean, too. He's done lots of such things. He is queer."

"Where is he now?"

"We don't know. He hasn't been home since that petty operation. My father isn't well, and I don't stay around home much myself. Came in last night feeling fine, and was met by the news that I'd got to sail my horse and retrench generally, not that you need be afraid of losing your job," he added kindly.

"I ain't ever afraid of losing my job." said Patsy. "Say, I'm such an all-around valuable party that I am always in demand."

They rubbed and petted the beautiful animal as he turned his large intelligent eyes upon them.

"Sometimes I think," said young Sontag, "that somebody's soul has got into this horse's body."

"I've got a friend," said Patsy, looking very solemn. "Little as you'd think it! He knows a lot about horses. I wish he could have this one. If I were a little better fixed"—here they both grinned—"I'd buy this blooming darling myself."

"The very idea! Get me a customer and I'll do something handsome for you."

"Not at all," Patsy said, politely.

"When will your friend come to look at the horse?"

"Give me time," said Patsy. "My friends lives in the country, and I must get word to him. He'll come in a few days, maybe. We want our beauty to be in prime order."

Patsy's plan was simplicity itself. If Nick would come, in the intimate talk of a deal in horses, he could get a good look at the young fellow again, and settle a few points still undecided. It is needless to say that Patsy did not possess all the points in the possession of Nick. Nick never disclosed himself entirely, until the dramatic moment came.

CHAPTER VII.

SONTAG'S TROUBLE.

Nick Carter was not often more surprised than he was when he received a letter from Sontag, senior, asking him to help him in a business matter that was troubling him. He sent the letter by a trusty hand. If Nick could give him a little of his valuable time he would meet him at any point which he might designate. The letter was sent to Nick from his headquarters in Chicago. He felt as if all things were coming his way. He replied that he was on his way West, and, if agreeable, would come to Mr. Sontag's house. It was finally settled that he should meet Mr. Sontag at the latter's office.

Nick was in a most complete and new attire. Even Patsy would not have known him.

Sontag produced the letter which he had received from the unknown man.

"Mr. Sontag," said Nick, "I am like a lawyer or a physician. Before I can advise you I must know how your case stands."

Sontag groaned.

"If I must go back into days that I try to forget and to atone for, I must. But digging up the dead is grewsome work."

"It is sometimes best for the living that it be done, but dig up as few as will be needed in this affair. I only meant that I could not advise you until I knew what hold these men have upon you."

The man hesitated still.

"Tell me just this," said Nick, "what would happen if these men were to 'reveal,' as they say, 'the past'?"

"Great Heaven!" almost shouted the man, "disgrace, ruin, every evil in the world but death. Death!" he repeated, "yes death, for I would not, could not live."

Nick pitied the man in spite of a feeling that he deserved retribution.

"Control yourself! We must look at it calmly if we are to accomplish anything."

"Yes, yes," groaned the despairing man.

"The case as it now stands," repeated Nick, "is this: These evils you dread, and that affright you are compounding a felony, receiving stolen goods and laying yourself liable at any time to be arrested for a definite and recent crime. That is how it stands.

"I don't wish to be hard on you, but I have never wished to help anybody into crime."

"Years ago," said the man, as if goaded by Nick and his terror both, "I did a dishonorable thing. A dishonorable thing. If suffering could undo it and wishing, I would stand to-night a barefoot ragged newsboy——"

"Or," put in Nick, "in the lonely foothills of the Rocky Mountains."

The man started as if he had been shot.

"What do you know?" he demanded, in a hoarse and dreadful tone.

"I am afraid that I know a great deal. I wish I did not. The knowledge is not of my seeking. I have not been looking up your private history. Life, Mr. Sontag, is a curious web."

Nick spoke in a quiet, subdued tone. It had its effect.

"Some men, whom I wronged then, have found me out. They have taken a devil's revenge. They sent a man to me a little while ago with all sorts of threats against me and my family."

"Mr. Sontag," said Nick, "I suppose you do not expect me to question you closely, but I must, if we come to an understanding."

"It is best. I have no hope but in you."

"Then tell me, what hold have these men upon you? It is many years since you had dealings with them. They seem to be a poor lot in every way. Why do you fear them? What can they do besides begging for money and annoying you?"

"If it were only money it might be borne. I did not fear them at all until they offered me the diamonds."

"But no man can compel you to touch them," said Nick, surprised.

"We will have no more mystery here," said the miserable man.

"My son, my wretched boy stole the diamonds! They know it, and, thinking that I will spend my last cent to shield him and keep from tearing wide all my own past life if he should be brought to trial, they intend to take my last cent, and they won't stop there. I'm lost!"

Silence fell upon them.

Then Nick spoke:

"I will not deceive you. This is a pretty bad affair. Perhaps we can get some light on it after a little."

At the mention of light, which signified help and perhaps mercy, the bowed head of the man was lifted, and he arose as if the interview might end here.

"There is still some time left," said Nick, looking at the date of the letter, and I advise you to take no action whatever until you hear from me. If you get any more letters, or news of any kind, inform me at once.

"This is a mix up," thought Nick.

"Where is your son?"

"I do not know. He has not been home since the robbery. His brother says that he came to the stable one night and told him he was in a bad scrape, and when he went away, cautioned him about keeping dark."

"Did he confess the robbery to you?"

Sontag unlocked a safe and took from it a crumpled typewritten paper.

"DEAR DAD: Don't look for me or for the diamonds. You can't blame me much, you know how it is yourself."

"Do you mean to tell me that you have no other

proof that your son took the diamonds than this document? Would you like to be convicted on such evidence?"

"Isn't that enough?"

"Did your son use a typewriter?"

"No, never. It was a poor joke with us that he never did anything with his hands."

"Do you suppose he would ask some one else to write out his confession on a typewriter? No," said Nick, "this is altogether too clumsy for even an ordinary amateur."

Nick wasted no more time in foolish questions. He left Sontag with a good deal of light shed on some of the hitherto dark spots.

On his return to C—— he found that Thomas Smith had improved a good deal, but the doctor advised waiting another day before attempting to continue his cross-examination.

He also found another summons to meet the other conspirators.

From all he could make out Thomas Smith was the only one of the men who had much brain or steadfastness. Each one of the others tried to convince him that he was the leader, and their disagreements had become pretty serious. They were evidently in desperate need of money. Nick did not spend the day of waiting in idleness. He had long interviews with his men, and he found time to cheer up Frank Armour, also.

Smith awoke in good condition, and Nick sat down by his bed, after assuring himself that they would be undisturbed.

"Now, Smith," said Nick, "I want you to tell me all that you are willing to tell."

Smith looked sharply at Nick.

"You have treated me white, and no mistake. I don't know what for, but you have. I'm a broken man, and I will tell the truth. Say, have you seen any of the boys?"

"Yes, I have," said Nick, determined to be truthful on his part. "They did not enlighten me much, for they are so anxious for the money that they did not seem to be able to keep their minds on any other subject."

"Guess they wouldn't like to have me lying in luxury. Think I'm another Sontag!"

"If you are able, will you go on and tell me what you started to the day you were taken sick?"

"I will tell you more than I meant to tell. But, Mr. Carter, you won't be hard on the boys! I never was one to turn State's evidence, and I ain't going to now."

"I don't wish to be hard on anybody," said Nick, "but it is my business to find out who stole those diamonds, and, if possible, to restore them to the rightful owner. Whoever did that deed deserves something. Do you suppose they thought of an honorable man, whose reputation is gone, though everybody is quiet about it, and even he does not know yet that his firm will ever trust him again, unless the guilty man or men are found!"

Nick spoke with unusual feeling and at length, for him.

He rightly discerned that the man before him still had a good deal of sentiment left.

"I will tell the story."

CHAPTER VIII.

A WARNING.

"When the four of us met, by accident, as some would say, we went over the years, and every man said that it was Sontag who had been his ruin.

"'I believed in things,' Jimmy Jones said.

"'I never stole a thing, or cheated, or even lied,' Shorty said.

"'I wrote to my old mother every week,' Bill James told us.

"And you?" asked Nick, as the man hesitated.

"I had never hated before," he replied, in a tone that made Nick, experienced as he was, shudder.

"Well, we tried to think of some way we could pay our debts to Sontag. We tried a good many things. But one night it all came to me in a dream. We would do some daring act and fasten the guilt on his son.

"Jimmy had been detailed to shadow the house and find out all about the family. I told you I had work-

at being a detective a little. I did not make it go very well, but I got onto a lot of tricks, and I seemed to remember them all.

"They came in well. One night we were about discouraged and ready for anything. Jimmy came in wild with excitement.

" 'There is a big job before us,' he said. 'A diamond peddler is stopping at the house and is leaving for the East with a lot of them not sold.' "

"How had he found this out?"

"We had made friends, or one of us had, with a queer son of Sontags, who says he is a student of human nature, and—I'll tell you about that after."

Nick saw that his question had confused Smith, and he let him go on as he would.

"Well, we watched and waited, and thought, and worked. We said that this was the only thing to do, to get those diamonds. We planned the thing pretty well for those who hadn't had practice. But, who was to do the deed? Planning was all right, but doing was another matter.

"I was the one the lot fell on, for we drew lots. I didn't care if I died for it. I was glad the lot fell on me. I even liked the thought of the wild flight and the flying leap!"

The man's voice arose in a cry almost a shriek. Nick was frightened. He wanted every word of this story. He gave the man some wine, and left him for a moment, not without a faithful watcher in the next room. When he returned, Nick took from his grip a paper, and, opening it, he spread it out on the table.

"Don't excite yourself, Smith. Just take a look at this paper."

It diverted Smith as he intended. He barely glanced at the document, which seemed a closely written pamphlet of many pages.

"I can go on now," he said.

Nick seated himself again, and Smith proceeded more calmly.

"I had this scar on my cheek, which seemed to help us to make up our minds what to do. I got a suit of young Sontag's clothes, even to a pocket handkerchief. He had a habit of masquerading a bit once in a while for a lark, and had a bushy red mustache. I am just his figure, and with some other little changes, and hat well pulled down, my eyes are just the color and all. You know the rest."

He stopped exhausted again.

"Smith," said Nick, "you need not exhaust and wear yourself out. I'm going to leave you for a while in good company, and, if you feel able, you can glance over this."

Nick detached a few pages of the manuscript, and handed it to Smith.

"I would like to ask one thing," said Nick, "how did you manage that flying leap?"

"I didn't manage. No human being could. I just leaped. It was a miracle. I wasn't even hurt, though for a little while I guess I did not know much."

As Nick left the room the man glanced down the page before him. He uttered a loud expression of astonishment. He then read in detail the story which he had been telling.

"I always heard that Nick Carter was the devil, or in league with him, and now I know it!" he cried.

As matters now stood, Nick was almost ready for most decisive action.

The sheriff had taken into custody the parties Nick had indicated, and matters were about to proceed vigorously when Nick met with a troublesome check. He could get no word from Bonner, the conductor of the train on that historic night. He had disappeared from his home; he had no family, and had made his home with some other railroad men in a boarding house in Omaha, when in town and off duty. He was a man of good habits and always bore a good name. While his testimony was not very valuable still it was needed.

If the conspirators had been old offenders and successful men in their line of roguery and had money, Nick would have suspected them of getting him out of the way. He felt particularly annoyed, for he had done such difficult things in this case; had found in the midst of false clews a clear line of action running all through it.

In the midst of all that he had done, Nick had found time to look at the horse Patsy had become at-

tached to, and he made an offer for it, intending to make Patsy a present for some particularly fine work the boy had done. He had thus met young Sontag, also.

The services of the railroad men had been enlisted, and a great search was being made for Bonner.

"Do you know," said the superintendent, "that I would not wonder if he is in some private asylum, two of which are in the neighborhood of Council Bluffs and Omaha."

"I'll have those places watched."

"Why not have them searched while you are at it?" said Nick.

"I'll do it myself," cried he, a new idea striking him.

Here was something definite to do while they were prosecuting other investigations to make their case complete.

Chick was summoned and went at once with the necessary papers to look through the asylum in Council Bluffs, while Nick went with officials to review the inmates of the one in Omaha.

The party passed through the various wards, Nick asking questions in regard to each one whom they saw.

"What is the particular malady that afflicts this young man," he asked, as they stopped before the door of a room in which a young man was sitting, evidently lost in thought.

"Queer," answered the attendant, "he thinks he is sane. A perfect delusion. He will ask you to help him out if you speak to him."

"Let me talk with him alone a minute, and see how he expresses himself."

"All right. We will walk slowly along this corridor."

As the footsteps died away the young fellow looked up in surprise to see some one quietly regarding him.

"Are you a physician?" asked the young fellow.

"Yes. I may call myself that," said Nick. "I am employed on so many cases."

"Do you think I am crazy?"

"No, Harry Sontag; no crazier than I am. Don't speak!" cautioned Nick. "Be perfectly docile. You will be out of here in a few days. I can't stop, but don't betray what I have told you."

Nick passed down the corridor and rejoined the party.

"Crazy as a loon," he said.

Nick was careful to make the same request to speak in the interest of science to two or three other of the inmates to divert suspicion.

A telegram was awaiting Nick at his hotel.

"Bonner traced to San Francisco. Alone."

A few hours later another message came. It was, of course, like the other, in cipher, and gave the welcome news that Bonner was found.

Nick was now so restless at the state of things that it was almost a relief when the third message came. It proved that it was a case of mistaken identity. Bonner was still to be found.

Late at night Nick admitted to his room one of his most trusty men.

"Mr. Carter," said the man, "you are in danger. There is a man on your track who will do you up if you give him a shade of a chance."

"So?" laughed Nick.

"He is one of the most dangerous men in this part of the country. Look out for him. I wish you would not go out alone."

Nick gave one of his peculiar smiles.

"Who is this man I ought to fear?"

"We do not know. But everywhere he is on our trail. He has hindered us at a great many points."

"It certainly has been like a game of chess. But I shall not call it a draw game yet."

"Not at all, it is only your personal safety that I am looking out for."

"I appreciate that," said Nick, with one of those rare smiles that lighted up his face and won everybody.

An hour later, going to his door, he found Bonner, the missing conductor, standing there.

CHAPTER IX.

A MOVE FOR VENGEANCE.

Meanwhile every man of the little gang, as Nick called Smith and his companions, had been to Nick or sent to him asking for money. He had given them money under the pretense of hiring them to work for him on this case. He sent them on wearisome and baffling errands. He kept them out of mischief by giving them so much work and requiring so much information. The reports he insisted upon receiving every night were most laborous affairs and caused the perspiration of toil, that was at least honest, to pour down their dishonest faces.

Sontag had not answered their last letter or paid any attention to their demands. Had it not been for the little they earned from Nick their plight would have been desperate.

What had become of Tom Smith was their main concern. Sometimes they thought that he was dead. That awful flying leap, of which he had told them, must have had its terrible results.

Sometimes, as to-night, they thought he had been sharper than they, and had gone to Sontag and demanded money and had lighted out with it.

There was so much mystery in the air that they did not dare go and look in that secret and almost inaccessible place where the diamonds were hidden.

Sometimes the awful thought came that some one might have found them. To-night, as they talked uneasily together, they heard suddenly a low whistle.

"It's Tom!" exclaimed Jimmy.

In their excitement they all arose and fairly dragged him into the room.

"You are in danger here, boys," he whispered, hoarsely.

"Police are on your tracks!"

"Set on by you? You fiend," yelled Jimmy, in his terror.

"How do you know? Give an account of yourself," demanded Shorty.

"You've been and blowed on us when we've been earning an honest living, waiting here just for you to come back."

"An honest living?" exclaimed Smith.

"Yes, honest!"

"No police has been set on by me. But Satan himself has got us all by the throat."

"What do you mean? Are you beside yourself?"

With a maddened sort of cry Shorty threw his bulky body against the breast of Smith.

"Do you tell what you've been doing, or I'll throttle you."

Smith was weak with excitement, and staggered back as Shorty released him.

"What'd you come back for if you can't tell what you mean?"

Then a strange thing happened. All with one accord joined in curses and threatenings, and Jimmy lunged forward as Smith drew back and both struck against the door. It opened outward, and with a cry both men fell.

Weak as he was, Smith recovered himself first. He sprang to his feet, and shouting:

"Good-by, good-by," in a voice whose strange wild note was remembered afterward when the men had gathered their scattered wits and thought somewhat calmly of the matter. At all events he was gone. If it were true that the police were after them they must follow.

They drew but one inference. He had gone for the jewels. They would follow, but first they would get the small sum coming to them from Nick. They put out every light. They talked in whispers.

They planned to start out one by one at different hours, and meet at a given place and as near a given time as possible.

"We've nothing to fear from Tom?" said Shorty. "He is true. He came to warn us."

"It's a pity that we didn't have sense enough to treat him right."

"Probably the police had him, and he, keeping mum, broke away and come to us."

"And to make him feel welcome we punched his head."

The men allowed that they had acted like fools, but must make the best of it. They decided to wait one more night, thinking Tom would come back.

Upon one point they always agreed, no matter how they differed on others. They were to proceed together to get the diamonds. All were to go or no one.

The night passed slowly away, and Tom had not appeared. Before the sun arose they started as they had agreed to do. It was a long, hard road before them. It was almost dark when they reached the hiding place. Jimmy was detailed to uncover the hole which they had dug, while they stood looking almost breathlessly on.

In a moment they expected to uncover their shining treasure!

With a wild cry of baffled desire Jimmy arose from his knees.

"They are gone," he shouted. He cared not if the whole world heard him.

"You lie!" came the deep voice of the older man.

"No. They are gone!"

Each man looked for himself. Each knelt upon the ground and groped around with his hands. It was hours before they gave up their confused search. They upbraided each other. They accused each other. Then, with one accord, they said:

"Tom!"

A terrible silence followed. Tom's shrift would have been short if they could have laid hands upon him.

A perfectly blank future lay before these men. One by one they allowed that it didn't matter much now what they did or what they did not do.

That night three tramps were added to the great army parading over the world. Two went away by different roads, but the third stayed about in the neighborhood of the burial place of the treasure. He slept there that night.

It was true that Tom had preceded them by some hours. He had taken the diamonds, and, going back to the town, had walked openly to the railroad station and taken a ticket for a western town.

Sontag, denying himself to strangers who called during these anxious days, did not deny himself to a man who sent a few poorly written words to him.

"I want to see you, and I am going to."

These words had some strange magic for him. He looked old and worn when Tom Smith entered the office where he agreed to meet him.

It was night, and he was alone. He had a revolver, and there was plenty of police protection, if he needed to call for it.

"Yes, Tom, I know you," he said, in reply to Tom's question. "I will gladly do anything I can to remedy matters. I am a penitent man."

"All I want is enough money to start honest in the world again."

"How much does it take to start honest. I will give you a thousand dollars?"

"No."

"Two thousand. Can you start honest for that?"

"I want just twenty-five dollars."

Sontag repressed an exclamation, and, turning toward his safe, said:

"You'd better make it a little more than that. Fifty, I say, gladly."

Tom stretched out his hand, and, stepping back as if to get a better light on the money, slipped a part of the diamonds into the safe.

"I only want the twenty-five," he said.

"I will pay you for all you have done for me," said Smith, as he stood at the door of Sontag's office.

"Don't speak of it," replied Sontag, ignoring any sinister meaning. "I am willing to do a good deal more for you."

"This is enough."

"Tom," said the well-dressed, comfortable-looking man, "it is a good many years since you and I met, and we may never meet again."

Smith turned away with a gesture of contempt which set strangely on his shabby figure.

He shuffled away, leaving his companion alone.

The next morning the office boy swept up some odd looking bits of greenish paper.

"My Jinks!" he said, "they's the long green."

Mr. Sontag, coming in then, found him piecing them together.

"Twenty-five dollars all tore up into little pieces!"

Mr. Sontag took the money with a thoughtful air. He gave the wondering boy half a dollar and turned into his inner office where he fell into a chair with a distressed look upon his face.

CHAPTER X.

THE RECOVERY OF THE JEWELS.

Nick Carter may be said to know the human mind well.

When he went out from his hotel, leaving Tom Smith alone, he knew before Tom Smith did, that he would flee like a bird to his companions. It sometimes almost frightened Nick himself to see how often these calculations of his came true.

Chick and Patsy often looked at him as if he were a supernatural being. Alone, unnoticed as they seemed by themselves to be, not one of that gang but was followed by a trusty man who, acting under orders from Nick, was ready at a moment's notice to nab the rascals.

All things had come to Nick. He had waited, but he had worked.

The day after the disappearance of Tom Smith, Nick and Chick went to Omaha. Taking an officer with them, they proceeded directly to the office of Sontag. He was alone when they were admitted.

"We have come for the diamonds!" said Nick.

"I arrest you for having stolen goods in your possession," the officer said, striding forward.

"There is some dreadful mistake," Sontag cried out. "I have no stolen goods in my possession."

"Open the safe!" demanded the detective.

With trembling hands Sontag obeyed. He drew out a bundle of paper and exclaimed: "Look for yourselves!" He swept his hand around within the safe, and there, dropping at his feet, unrolled and scattered were the missing stones.

"My God!" cried the miserable man.

"I did not steal them! I did not put them there. I know nothing of who did."

His teeth chattered, his lips were ashen. He trembled.

"There is but one thing to do," said Nick, to whom the officer looked.

"Arrest this man."

"You are my prisoner."

The officer advanced toward the abject and dismayed man.

They went out quietly together. Nick with the diamonds in his possession.

Through the streets of Omaha they went in a closed carriage.

As the sheriff opened the doors of his too hospitable residence, Sontag shook like a leaf. His face underwent some change. He looked like a tiger about to spring.

"Look at him, Nick," whispered Chick.

"Mr. Sontag," said Nick, "be cool. Perhaps this may not be so bad as it looks."

To his surprise Sontag was not taken to a cell. He was allowed to go into a room where the sheriff detained people for a time. It was carefully guarded, but it was large enough to admit quite a company.

Patsy had been sent with cipher telegrams for Armour, and for the firm of Baymore, Say & Co., New York, while Chick went on other important business.

The long and tedious story of the missing diamonds was drawing to a close. Sontag had been allowed, of course, to send for a lawyer, who would conduct his case for him.

While he waited in the strange quarters fate had given him, a message was brought to Nick.

For a moment there was an expression of dismay on Nick's face. Presently he was himself again.

A quick consultation with the sheriff, and soon they were moving on.

"Come," said Nick, "we have to go to take some testimony from a wounded man. We must hurry."

They started at a mad gallop. The horses were fresh, and Nick saw, as they neared an old house in the suburbs by a preconcerted signal, that they were not too late.

Sontag was hurried into the house, a large posse of men following.

On a miserable bed in a squalid room a man was stretched out. He evidently had not long to live.

Beside him sat a physician administering stimulants, while at the foot of the bed knelt an old woman, whose face looked familiar to Chick.

"Come here," said Nick, beckoning to Sontag.

As he came slowly forward, oppressed with the gloom and even horror of his condition, he said, in a choking voice:

"Tom! Brother!"

Every man in the room started.

"Yes, brother," answered the dying man.

Taking the oath to tell the truth as he hoped for mercy, in a feeble voice the wounded man began:

"Before it is too late I want to swear that I put the diamonds in the safe. I went there to do it. I did it for revenge. My brother had injured me."

Here Sontag sank on his knees and groaned aloud.

"I stole the diamonds. They are not all there. I took out three. I sold them." He stopped to gasp, and, as he turned his head, the blood-stained pillow made the scene still more ghastly.

"No one knew what I did. I went back to warn the boys——

"They turned on me like my own flesh and blood almost.

"Then I stole them again.

"I got my brother's son put into an asylum. I was a detective, too."

He stopped and looked feebly at Nick.

"Not like him. He's white."

The man breathed so heavily that all felt that the end was near.

Nick whispered softly to the doctor, who still sat by the bedside.

The dying man sank into an unconscious state.

Nick and all the men withdrew silently.

They stood just outside the door when the doctor came out.

"He is gone," he said.

With his usual thoughtfulness Nick spoke to the sheriff, and their carriage was given up to Sontag and his lawyer, who had come at the last moment. As they appeared at the door Nick saw for the first time fully the face of the old woman.

"Mr. Carter," said Sontag, "hereafter she is my mother. She was Tom's. Our fathers were the same."

The sheriff and Nick both shook hands with him and told him that they rejoiced in his release.

"It would have been just the same thing, Mr. Sontag, if your brother had not made his confession in your presence. Our friend here has it all in black and white."

Tom Smith, as he called himself, was buried by his brother, and the old woman, who had entered somewhat into the plans for extorting money from Sontag, was given a little home in which to pass her days in comfort. Later on Nick sought her out, and from her story he learned that all the later part of the life of Tom had been enshrouded in mystery. It was not judged wise, or in the interest of justice, to punish him further.

The other members of the gang were tried and con-

victed for conspiracy, and on other charges, which brought them sentences of years of imprisonment.

Nick was permitted to see them before they left the sheriff's charge.

They seemed glad to see him. Nick's calm, cultured face, and that air of candidly doing disagreeable duties, had touched them with emotion as genuine as it was unexpected.

Had Nick been a leader of men and an organizer, he could have counted on the loyalty of these men to the death.

"You have reason to be proud of your work," said Shorty.

Nick looked at him, quickly.

"I am always glad to do the work laid out for me. Take these boys," he said, handing them some cigars and lighting one himself.

"I just came in here to tell you, each one of you, that when your time expires I want you to come and find me. I am such a busy man that I may not keep track of you."

"I expect," said Jimmy, with a sort of smile, "that we'll be pretty busy, too."

"Better so." Nick gave one an address which would always reach him.

"If I'm alive when you come out I will have some work for you to do. You were always faithful to me."

Something, was it tears, gathered in the eyes of these rough, hardened men as they looked after Nick. He walked away with a springy tread that each man envied.

CHAPTER XI.

IN THE NICK OF TIME.

There were many threads yet to wind up in this case which had occupied the best energies of Nick, and Chick, and Patsy.

Nick had had many an exciting, wild case, which had not given him the little troubles that this case had. In some respects his satisfaction was complete. In others it was not satisfactory.

A case of wild outlawry, where he had desperate villainy to contend with, did not interest or dwell with him as did this with its tangled clews.

He was touched with the thought of acting, not as detective, but as peacemaker.

Nick really wished Mr. Sontag to become reconciled to his son. He determined to give himself a little vacation of a few days, and see what he could do.

Among the letters left for him on the morning on which he came to this decision, was one from the very man he was thinking of.

"My Dear Mr. Carter," it began.

"I have not, as you may imagine, passed a very pleasant time since parting with you. The past, with all its wrongs to me and the sins which I also committed, has been my constant companion. I herewith inclose a check to be paid to the firm of Baymore, Say & Co. This represents the value of the stones which my brother took. Will you do me the favor to see that they understand the entire case? I do not wish to have them think that I am buying them, or anybody else.

"I do wish them to know, from you, whom I know they will believe, that I am guiltless of that particular crime.

"This matter attended to, will you find my son? I have no knowledge of his whereabouts. Neither has his brother.

"We fear that he dares not come home. I turned him out. Mr. Carter, I put him into that asylum. My poor brother, who had ferreted out many things, took that crime also upon his shoulders to save me.

"I send you, by this mail, pictures and descriptions to aid you in finding him."

Nick smiled. He read the letter to Chick and to Patsy, who were sitting with him at the time.

"Now," said Patsy, "as I'm a blooming guy, I would let the old skunk think that you don't know where the boy is. A great chance to get a reputation as a finder of lost children!"

"I think myself," said Chick, "that the old man is getting off altogether too easy. He suspected, or pretended to suspect, his own son, and put up a big bluff as a despairing father. When all the trouble was that he was afraid that the young fellow, to whom he had been not too kind a father, would let out something he had found out about his past life."

"I suppose," said Patsy, "that his Uncle Thomas let him know a few things."

"Always let the dead rest, if you can," Nick said, looking kindly at his young helper and admirer.

Chick was instructed to communicate with Harry Sontag that night, and let him know that his father was still interested in him.

Nick wrote a few lines to the father. He ignored the question of the boy's whereabouts. He simply asked if Mr. Sontag was willing to help the boy to engage in some work, and start him in it if the young fellow, on his part, would agree to try to do well. To this, of course, but one answer could be given by the father.

If he did not like the terms that Nick seemed to be making he could not in decency refuse to reply affirmatively. He at the present time wished far more than for the return of his son to make a good impression on Nick.

It was settled that father and son should meet in the presence of Nick and talk matters over.

Chick rather wondered at Nick. But it was evident his heart was in it.

The reconciliation was complete. And the Sontags practically passed out of Nick's life.

One of the things which did not surprise Nick, and which a less experienced detective would have marveled at, was the absence of Bonner and the difficulty in finding him. This was simply a coincidence. It was clearly proved that he had gone to visit an old aunt of his and was taken sick there. She lived in a remote little country place. She did not take a paper, and he, taking his first vacation in years, was glad to know nothing of the world of railroad and telegraphs.

Frank Armour was again sent out with diamonds by his firm. He never knew that they had held even a momentary suspicion that he was involved in any way in the great diamond robbery, which continued to be a story of interest in police circles for many a day.

Nick left Omaha for the East. He had a new case of an entirely different kind to take up, and he felt that the change would serve as all the vacation he needed.

He hoped to be able to give both Chick and Patsy some difficult parts of it. They had helped him both delicately and shrewdly in this one.

They were to remain in the West until he planned their work.

Nick's train was delayed at a station where it stopped for water. Nick, as his custom was, went out to stretch his tired legs and walk up and down the platform. As he turned to go to the car, he heard a low and peculiar whistle. His ears were always alert for such sounds. He heard no answer to it, and, in an instant, he felt that it was intended for him. It seemed to come from a dark bit of woods not far from the track. It was a melancholy sound like that of a whip-poor-will.

As good or bad luck would have it, he had brought his grip out with him, and he decided to investigate the sound even if his train went on without him.

He stepped off the track and ran lightly down the bank, which was only three feet or so deep.

The sound was repeated and was quite near. He stepped behind a tree and waited. In an instant his arms were caught from behind, a hand was put over his mouth, and he was half carried and half dragged back into the woods. Nick was powerful and never quite unprepared for attacks, but this was a surprising thing, even for him.

As the train swung out and away with its wild and unearthly whistling, the man took his hand from Nick's mouth.

"Who are you?" said Nick, as he shook himself loose.

The man lighted a little taper that he took from his pocket and held it up to his face.

"Jimmy!" cried Nick, "I thought better things of you!"

"Wait. Don't," cried Jimmy. "I was helped out of prison. I will be wanted in a minute, but I was determined to save your life!"

"My life!" ejaculated Nick.

"There's going to be an accident," said Jimmy.

Nick's face was white.

"Do you mean that while we are standing here men are to be hurried to their death."

"I mean it!"

He flung his arms about Nick, and twisted his legs about Nick's knees in such a way that for an instant Nick was helpless. Then he twisted himself loose, and, springing upon the wretch, the two men struggled wildly in the darkness and on the rough and rocky ground.

Nick triumphed. He held Jimmy down with one knee. He bore upon him without mercy.

"Tell me," he cried, "where it is to be! If I let you up, will you tell me, you miserable man, what we can do?"

No answer came. The man had fainted. Nick groped around, found his grip, and took handcuffs from it. He bound Jimmy hand and foot. Then, leaving him upon the ground, he sprang forward in the darkness in the direction which the train had gone. By this confused act, accounted for by the desperate struggle he had just gone through, Nick lost a few moments. He turned back and rushed up to the little station. It was perfectly dark. Not a sound was heard. The door was locked.

Nick broke in a window, and, fumbling around in the darkness, he found a telegraph key. He tried to start the instrument, but it had evidently been tampered with.

"I must have light!" he said. In his struggle his pockets had been torn and his match safe was gone. After what seemed hours he found one solitary match. Would it light? Would it go out? Nick held his breath! It lighted! It burned brightly. Nick thanked Heaven as he lighted the candle which stood on the table beside the telegraph instrument.

Under the table in one corner of the room, huddled in a pitiful heap, lay the young operator. He appeared to be dead! But what is one dead man to the hundreds, perhaps, that moment being hurled into eternity! Nick worked like a madman. The sweat poured down his face. At last he got the instrument fixed and called the next station.

"Has the eastbound express passed?"

"No!" came back the answer. Then Nick sent faster than he ever did in his life.

After he had done all that lay in the power of one man, he turned his haggard face toward the young fellow who still lay like a log under the table.

As Nick bent over him he discovered that there was a faint odor of ether.

He worked over him for some time before there were any signs of life. At last he was rewarded by the long-

drawn sigh denoting that life was not gone. The dismay of the young man was pitiable when he was fully awakened. He dashed to his instrument, and went to work with all his might to get off the messages which he had been so cruelly interrupted in sending.

The two men waited in an agony of suspense when Nick had opportunity to tell him of his fears.

No one can fully understand the supreme joy that filled Nick's heart when he heard that he had not been too late.

There was no accident to the Eastern express that night.

Nick took the next through train east.

A message came, just before he left, asking him to stop without fail at G——.

When Nick arrived at G—— he was met by a gentleman with a carriage, who took him at once to the sheriff's house. As Nick followed his companion into the room into which they were invited he could hardly believe his eyes.

"Chick!" he said, in astonishment.

There was another surprise still, for there came at that moment from behind Chick, the familiar form of Patsy.

"How came you here?" he asked.

"We received a message asking us to follow you at once to New York. It was from Baymore, Say & Co.," Chick answered. "They said it would be all right with you, and we came."

"But why are you here?" he asked, almost impatiently. "I want to know what I am here for myself."

Then was made plain to Nick that the great diamond robbery was not quite a closed incident, after all.

Two of the gang had been helped to escape. They believed that no one but Nick would be trusted with the diamonds. They had made a plan that they thought would not fail, this time.

They had enlisted in their cause a number of outlaws that they came upon by accident. All worked well. Jimmy was left behind to keep a lookout for another and more desperate man upon whom they depended to do away with Nick if the railroad left anything to be done.

Jimmy had weakened when he saw Nick walking back and forth innocently enjoying the change from the car. Possibly he thought there would be enough loot without the diamonds.

"More likely," said Chick, "he thought you had them on you, and he would have run off with them himself or divided with the man who didn't come."

What Jimmy's real thoughts were will never be known. Men going out to look for him found no trace of him on the spot where Nick had left him.

A few days afterward, a swollen and discolored body was found partly on the bank and partly in the shallow river a mile from the station. It was identified as that of the man known to Nick as Jimmy.

All the other men were apprehended, tried and sentenced to pay the extreme penalty of the law for their many offenses.

When Nick and Chick and Patsy reached New York they were met by representatives of the great firm which insisted on presenting them each with a handsome reminder of this case.

THE END.

The next issue, No. 361, will contain "Nick Carter's Great Success; or, The Hunting Down of Insurance Frauds." This was one of the most interesting and exciting cases in which the great detective and his assistants were ever engaged. Nick always declared that his experience in the chamber of horrors was something never to be forgotten. It is a story of the most fascinating interest throughout.

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